

Always Singing One Note—A Vernacular Bible

Why William Tyndale Lived and Died

2006 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors

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By John Piper January 31, 2006

What Was the “One Note” He Always Sang?

Stephen Vaughn was an English merchant commissioned by Thomas Cromwell, the king’s adviser, to find William Tyndale and inform him that King Henry VIII desired him to come back to England out of hiding on the continent. In a letter to Cromwell from Vaughan dated June 19, 1531, Vaughan wrote about Tyndale (1494-1536) these simple words: “I find him always singing one note.”¹ That one note was this: Will the King of England give his official endorsement to a vernacular Bible for all his English subjects? If not, Tyndale will not come. If so, Tyndale will give himself up to the king and never write another book.

This was the driving passion of his life—to see the Bible translated from the Greek and Hebrew into ordinary English available for every person in England to read.

Henry VIII was angry with Tyndale for believing and promoting Martin Luther’s Reformation teachings. In particular he was angry because of Tyndale’s book, *Answer to Sir Thomas More*. Thomas More (famous for his book *Utopia* and the movie *A Man for All Seasons*) was the Lord Chancellor who helped Henry VIII write his repudiation of Luther called *Defense of the Seven Sacraments*. Thomas More was thoroughly Roman Catholic and radically anti-Reformation, anti-Luther, and anti-Tyndale. So Tyndale had come under the same excoriating criticism by Thomas More.² In fact More had a “near-rabid hatred”³ for Tyndale and published three long responses to him totaling near three-quarters of a million words.⁴

But in spite of this high court anger against Tyndale, the king’s message to Tyndale, carried by Vaughan, was mercy: “The kings’ royal majesty is . . . inclined to mercy, pity, and compassion.”⁵

The thirty-seven-year-old Tyndale was moved to tears by this offer of mercy. He had been an exile from his homeland for seven years. But then he sounds his “one note” again: Will the king authorize a vernacular English Bible from the original languages? Vaughan gives us Tyndale’s words from May, 1531:

I assure you, if it would stand with the King’s most gracious pleasure to grant only a bare text of the Scripture [that is, without explanatory notes] to be put forth among his people, like as is put forth among the subjects of the emperor in these parts, and of other Christian princes, be it of the translation of what

person soever shall please his Majesty, I shall immediately make faithful promise never to write more, not abide two days in these parts after the same: but immediately to repair unto his realm, and there most humbly submit myself at the feet of his royal majesty, offering my body to suffer what pain or torture, yea, what death his grace will, so this [translation] be obtained. Until that time, I will abide the asperity of all chances, whatsoever shall come, and endure my life in as many pains as it is able to bear and suffer.⁶

In other words, Tyndale will give himself up to the king on one condition—that the king authorize an English Bible translated from the Greek and Hebrew in the common language of the people.

The king refused. And Tyndale never went to his homeland again. Instead, if the king and the Roman Catholic Church would not provide a printed Bible in English for the common man to read, Tyndale would, even if it cost him his life—which it did five years later.

The Great Achievement: New Testament and Reformation

When he was twenty-eight years old in 1522, he was serving as a tutor in the home of John Walsh in Gloucestershire spending most of his time studying Erasmus' Greek New Testament which had just been printed six years before in 1516. And we should pause here and make clear what an incendiary thing this Greek New Testament was in history. David Daniell describes the magnitude of this event:

This was the first time that the Greek New Testament had been printed. It is no exaggeration to say that it set fire to Europe. Luther [1483-1546] translated it into his famous German version of 1522. In a few years there appeared translations from the Greek into most European vernaculars. They were the true basis of the popular reformation.⁷

Every day William Tyndale was seeing these Reformation truths more clearly in the Greek New Testament as an ordained Catholic priest. Increasingly he was making himself suspect in this Catholic house of John Walsh. Learned men would come for dinner, and Tyndale would discuss the things he was seeing in the New Testament. John Foxe tells us that one day an exasperated Catholic scholar at dinner with Tyndale said, "We were better be without God's law than the pope's." In response Tyndale spoke his famous words, "I defy the Pope and all his laws. . . . If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow, shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost."⁸

Four years later Tyndale finished the English translation of the Greek New Testament in Worms, Germany, and began to smuggle it into England in bails of cloth. He had grown up in Gloucestershire, the cloth-working county, and now we see what that turn of providence was about.⁹ By October of 1526 the book had been banned by Bishop Tunstall in London, but the print run was at least three thousand. And the books were getting to the people. Over the next eight years, five pirated editions were printed as well.¹⁰

In 1534 Tyndale published a revised New Testament, having learned Hebrew in the meantime, probably in Germany, which helped him better understand the connections between the Old and New Testaments.

Daniell calls this 1534 New Testament “the glory of his life’s work.”¹¹ If Tyndale was “always singing one note,” this was the crescendo of the song of his life—the finished and refined New Testament in English.

For the first time ever in history, the Greek New Testament was translated into English. And for the first time ever the New Testament in English was available in a printed form. Before Tyndale there were only hand-written manuscripts of the Bible in English. These manuscripts we owe to the work and inspiration of John Wyclif and the Lollards¹² from a hundred-thirty years earlier.¹³ For a thousand years the only translation of the Greek and Hebrew Bible was the Latin Vulgate, and few people could understand it, even if they had access to it.

Before he was martyred in 1536 Tyndale had translated into clear, common English¹⁴ not only the New Testament¹⁵ but also the Pentateuch, Joshua to 2 Chronicles, and Jonah.¹⁶ All this material became the basis of the *Great Bible* issued by Miles Coverdale in England in 1539¹⁷ and the basis for the *Geneva Bible* published in 1557—“the Bible of the nation,”¹⁸ which sold over a million copies between 1560 and 1640.

We do not get a clear sense of Tyndale’s achievement without some comparisons. We think of the dominant King James Version as giving us the pervasive language of the English Bible. But Daniell clarifies the situation:

William Tyndale gave us our English Bible. The sages assembled by King James to prepare the Authorized Version of 1611, so often praised for unlikely corporate inspiration, took over Tyndale’s work. Nine-tenths of the Authorized Version’s New Testament is Tyndale’s. The same is true of the first half of the Old Testament, which was as far as he was able to get before he was executed outside Brussels in 1536.¹⁹

Here is a sampling of the English phrases we owe to Tyndale:

“Let there be light” ([Genesis 1:3](#)).

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” ([Genesis 4:9](#))

“The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make his face to shine upon thee and be merciful unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace” ([Numbers 6:24-26](#)).

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” ([John 1:1](#)).

“There were shepherds abiding in the field” ([Luke 2:8](#)).

“Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted” ([Matthew 5:4](#)).

“Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name” ([Matthew 6:9](#)).

“The signs of the times” ([Matthew 16:3](#))

“The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” ([Matthew 26:41](#)).

“He went out . . . and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26:75). Those two words are still used by almost all modern translations (NIV, NASB, ESV, NKJV). It has not been improved on for five hundred years in spite of weak efforts like one recent translation: “cried hard.” Unlike that phrase, “the rhythm of his two words carries the experience.”²⁰

“A law unto themselves” (Romans 2:14)

“In him we live, move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels” (1 Corinthians 13:1)

“Fight the good fight” (1 Timothy 6:12).

According to Daniell, “The list of such near-proverbial phrases is endless.”²¹ Five hundred years after his great work “newspaper headlines still quote Tyndale, though unknowingly, and he has reached more people than even Shakespeare.”²²

Luther’s translation of 1522 is often praised for “having given a language to the emerging German nation.” Daniell claims the same for Tyndale in English:

In his Bible translations, Tyndale’s conscious use of everyday words, without inversions, in a neutral word-order, and his wonderful ear for rhythmic patterns, gave to English not only a Bible language, but a new prose. England was blessed as a nation in that the language of its principal book, as the Bible in English rapidly became, was the fountain from which flowed the lucidity, suppleness and expressive range of the greatest prose thereafter.²³

His craftsmanship with the English language amounted to genius.²⁴

He translated two-thirds of the Bible so well that his translations endured until today.²⁵

This was not merely a literary phenomenon; it was a spiritual explosion. Tyndale’s Bible and writings were the kindling that set the Reformation on fire in England.

How Did Tyndale Accomplish This?

The question arises: How did William Tyndale accomplish this historic achievement? We can answer this in Tyndale’s case by remembering two ways that a pastor must die in the ministry. We must die to the notion that we do not have to think hard or work hard to achieve spiritual goals. And we must die to the notion that our thinking and our working is decisive in achieving spiritual goals.

Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:7, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.” First, think. Work. Don’t bypass the hard work of thinking about apostolic truth. But second, remember this: “the Lord will give you understanding.” You work. He gives. If he withholds, all our working is in vain. But he ordains that we use our minds and that we work in achieving spiritual ends. So Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” The key to spiritual achievement is to work hard, and to know and believe and feel and be happy that God’s sovereign grace is the decisive cause of all the good that comes.

The way these two truths come together in Tyndale's life explains how he could accomplish what he did. And one of the best ways to see it is to compare him with Erasmus, the Roman Catholic humanist scholar who was famous for his books *Enchiridion* and *The Praise of Folly* and for his printed Greek New Testament.

Erasmus was twenty-eight years older than Tyndale, but they both died in 1536—Tyndale martyred by the Roman Catholic Church, Erasmus a respected member of that church. Erasmus had spent time in Oxford and Cambridge, but we don't know if he and Tyndale ever met.

On the surface, one sees remarkable similarities between Tyndale and Erasmus. Both were great linguists. Erasmus was a Latin scholar and produced the first printed Greek New Testament. Tyndale knew eight languages: Latin, Greek, German, French, Hebrew, Spanish, Italian, and English. Both men loved the natural power of language and were part of a rebirth of interest in the way language works.

For example, Erasmus wrote a book called *De copia* that Tyndale no doubt used as a student at Oxford.²⁶ It helped students increase their abilities to exploit the "copious" potential of language. This was hugely influential in the early 1500s in England and was used to train students in the infinite possibilities of varied verbal expression. The aim was to keep that language from sinking down to mere jargon and worn-out slang and uncreative, unimaginative, prosaic, colorless, boring speech.

One practice lesson for students from *De copia* was to give "no fewer than one hundred fifty ways of saying 'Your letter has delighted me very much.'" The point was to force students "to use of all the verbal muscles in order to avoid any hint of flabbiness."²⁷ It is not surprising that this is the kind of educational world that gave rise to William Shakespeare (who was born in 1564). Shakespeare is renown for his unparalleled use of copiousness in language. One critic wrote, "Without Erasmus, no Shakespeare."²⁸

So both Erasmus and Tyndale were educated in an atmosphere of conscious craftsmanship.²⁹ That is, they both believed in hard work to say things clearly and creatively and compellingly when they spoke for Christ.

Not only that, but they both believed the Bible should be translated into the vernacular of every language. Erasmus wrote in the preface to his Greek New Testament,

Christ wishes his mysteries to be published as widely as possible. I would wish even all women to read the gospel and the epistles of St. Paul, and I wish that they were translated into all languages of all Christian people, that they might be read and known, not merely by the Scotch and the Irish, but even by the Turks and the Saracens. I wish that the husbandman may sing parts of them at his plow, that the weaver may warble them at his shuttle, that the traveler may with their narratives beguile the weariness of the way.³⁰

Tyndale could not have said it better.

Both were concerned with the corruption and abuses in the Catholic Church, and both wrote about Christ and the Christian life. Tyndale even translated Erasmus' *Enchiridion*, a kind of spiritual handbook for the Christian life—what Erasmus called *philosophia Christi*.

But there was a massive difference between these men, and it had directly to do with the other half of the paradox, namely, that we must die not just to intellectual and linguistic laziness, but also to human presumption—human self-exaltation and self-sufficiency. Erasmus and Luther had clashed in the 1520s over the freedom of the will—Erasmus defending human self-determination and Luther arguing for the depravity and bondage of the will.³¹ Tyndale was firmly with Luther here.

Our will is locked and knit faster under the will of the devil than could an hundred thousand chains bind a man unto a post.³²

Because . . . [by] nature we are evil, therefore we both think and do evil, and are under vengeance under the law, convict to eternal damnation by the law, and are contrary to the will of God in all our will and in all things consent to the will of the fiend.³³

It is not possible for a natural man to consent to the law, that it should be good, or that God should be righteous which maketh the law.³⁴

This view of human sinfulness set the stage for Tyndale's grasp of the glory of God's sovereign grace in the gospel. Erasmus—and Thomas More with him—did not see the depth of the human condition, their own condition, and so did not see the glory and explosive power of what the reformers saw in the New Testament. What the reformers like Tyndale and Luther saw was not a *philosophia Christi* but the massive work of God in the death and resurrection of Christ to save hopelessly enslaved and hell-bound sinners.

Erasmus does not live or write in this realm of horrible condition and gracious blood-bought salvation. He has the appearance of reform in the *Enchiridion*, but something is missing. To walk from Erasmus into Tyndale is to move (to paraphrase Mark Twain) from a lightning bug to a lightning bolt.

Daniell puts it like this:

Something in the *Enchiridion* is missing. . . . It is a masterpiece of humanist piety. . . . [But] the activity of Christ in the Gospels, his special work of salvation so strongly detailed there and in the epistles of Paul, is largely missing. Christologically, where Luther thunders, Erasmus makes a sweet sound: what to Tyndale was an impregnable stronghold feels in the *Enchiridion* like a summer pavilion.³⁵

Where Luther and Tyndale were blood-earnest about our dreadful human condition and the glory of salvation in Christ, Erasmus and Thomas More joked and bantered. When Luther published his 95 theses in 1517, Erasmus sent a copy of them to More—along with a “jocular letter including the anti-papal games, and witty satirical diatribes against abuses within the church, which both of them loved to make.”³⁶

I linger here with this difference between Tyndale and Erasmus because I am trying to penetrate to how Tyndale accomplished what he did through translating the New Testament. Explosive reformation is what he accomplished in England. This was not the effect of Erasmus' highbrow, elitist, layered nuancing of Christ and church tradition. Erasmus and Thomas More may have satirized the monasteries and clerical abuses, but they were always playing games compared to Tyndale.

And in this they were very much like notable Christian writers in our own day. Listen to this remarkable assessment from Daniell, and see if you do not hear a description of certain *emergent church* writers and *New Perspective* champions:

Not only is there no fully realized Christ or Devil in Erasmus's book . . . : there is a touch of irony about it all, with a feeling of the writer cultivating a faintly superior ambiguity: as if to be dogmatic, for example about the full theology of the work of Christ, was to be rather distasteful, below the best, elite, humanist heights. . . . By contrast Tyndale . . . is ferociously single-minded ["always singing one note"]; the matter in hand, the immediate access of the soul to God without intermediary, is far too important for hints of faintly ironic superiority. . . . Tyndale is as four-square as a carpenter's tool. But in Erasmus's account of the origins of his book there is a touch of the sort of layering of ironies found in the games with *personae*.³⁷

It is ironic and sad that today supposedly avant-garde Christian writers can strike this cool, evasive, imprecise, artistic, superficially reformist pose of Erasmus and call it "*post-modern*" and capture a generation of unwitting, historically naïve, emergent people who don't know they are being duped by the same old verbal tactics used by the elitist humanist writers in past generations. We saw them last year in Athanasius' day (the slippery Arians at Nicaea), and we see them now in Tyndale's day. It's not post-modern. It's pre-modern—because it is perpetual.

What drove Tyndale to sing "one note" all his life was the rock-solid conviction that all humans were in bondage to sin, blind, dead, damned, and helpless, and that God had acted in Christ to provide salvation by grace through faith. This is what lay hidden in the Latin Scriptures and the church system of penance and merit. The Bible must be translated for the sake of the liberating, life-giving gospel.³⁸

There is only one hope for our liberation from the bonds of sin and eternal condemnation, Tyndale said: "Neither can any creature loose the bonds, save the blood of Christ only."³⁹

By grace . . . we are plucked out of Adam the ground of all evil and grafted [sic] in Christ, the root of all goodness. In Christ God loved us, his elect and chosen, before the world began and reserved us unto the knowledge of his Son and of his holy gospel: and when the gospel⁴⁰ is preached to us openeth our hearts and giveth us grace to believe, and putteth the spirit of Christ in us: and we know him as our Father most merciful, and consent to the law and love it inwardly in our heart and desire to fulfill it and sorrow because we do not.⁴¹

This massive dose of bondage to sin and deliverance by blood-bought sovereign grace⁴² is missing in Erasmus. This is why there is an elitist lightness to his religion—just like there is to so much of evangelicalism today. Hell and sin and atonement and sovereign grace were not weighty realities for him.

But for Tyndale they were everything. And in the middle of these great realities was the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This is why the Bible had to be translated, and ultimately this is why Tyndale was martyred.

By faith are we saved only in believing the promises. And though faith be never without love and good works, yet is our saving imputed neither to love nor unto good works but unto faith only.⁴³

Faith the mother of all good works justifieth us, before we can bring forth any good work: as the husband marryeth his wife before he can have any lawful children by her.⁴⁴

This is the answer to how William Tyndale accomplished what he did in translating the New Testament and writing books that set England on fire with the reformed faith. He worked assiduously like the most skilled artist in the craft of compelling translation, and he was deeply passionate about the great doctrinal truths of the gospel of sovereign grace. Man is lost, spiritually dead, condemned. God is sovereign; Christ is sufficient. Faith is all. Bible translation and Bible truth were inseparable for Tyndale, and in the end it was the truth—especially the truth of justification by faith—that ignited Britain with reformed fire and then brought the death sentence to this Bible translator.

The Implacable Opposition to the Bible

It is almost incomprehensible to us how viciously opposed the Roman Catholic Church was to the translation of the Scriptures into English. John Wyclif and his followers called “Lollards”⁴⁵ had spread written manuscripts of English translations from the Latin in the late 1300s. In 1401 Parliament passed the law *de Haeretico Comburendo*—“on the burning of heretics”—to make heresy punishable by burning people alive at the stake. The Bible translators were in view.

Then in 1408 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundell, created the *Constitutions of Oxford* which said,

It is a dangerous thing, as witnesseth blessed St. Jerome to translate the text of the Holy Scripture out of one tongue into another, for in the translation the same sense is not always easily kept. . . . We therefore decree and ordain, that no man, hereafter, by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue . . . and that no man can read any such book . . . in part or in whole.⁴⁶

Together these statutes meant that you could be burned alive by the Catholic Church for simply reading the Bible in English. The dramatist John Bale (1495-1563) “as a boy of 11 watched the burning of a young man in Norwich for possessing the Lord’s prayer in English. . . . John Foxe records . . . seven Lollards burned at Coventry in 1519 for teaching their children the Lord’s Prayer in English.”⁴⁷

Tyndale hoped to escape this condemnation by getting official authorization for his translation in 1524. But he found just the opposite and had to escape from London to the continent where he did all his translating and writing for the next twelve years. He lived as a fugitive the entire time until his death near Brussels in 1536.

He watched a rising tide of persecution and felt the pain of seeing young men burned alive who were converted by reading his translation and his books. His closest friend, John Frith, was arrested in London and tried by Thomas More and burned alive July 4, 1531, at the age of twenty-eight. Richard Bayfield ran the ships that took Tyndale's books to England. He was betrayed and arrested, and Thomas More wrote on December 4, 1531, that Bayfield "the monk and apostate [was] well and worthily burned in Smythfelde."⁴⁸

Three weeks later the same end came to John Tewkesbury. He was converted by reading Tyndale's *Parable of the Wicked Mammon* which defended justification by faith alone. He was whipped in Thomas More's garden and had his brow squeezed with small ropes till blood came out of his eyes. Then he was sent to the Tower where he was racked till he was lame. Then at last they burned him alive. Thomas More "rejoiced that his victim was now in hell, where Tyndale 'is like to find him when they come together.'"⁴⁹

Four months later James Bainham followed in the flames in April of 1532. He had stood up during the mass at St. Augustine's Church in London and lifted a copy of Tyndale's New Testament and pleaded with the people to die rather than deny the word of God. That virtually was to sign his own death warrant. Add to these Thomas Bilney, Thomas Dugate, John Bent, Thomas Harding, Andrew Hewet, Elizabeth Barton and others, all burned alive for sharing the views of William Tyndale about the Scriptures and the reformed faith.⁵⁰

Why this extraordinary hostility against the English New Testament, especially from Thomas More who vilified Tyndale repeatedly in his denunciation of the reformers he burned? Some would say that the New Testament in English was rejected because it was accompanied with Reformation notes that the church regarded as heretical. That was true of later versions, but not the first 1526 edition. It did not have notes, and this is the edition that Bishop Tunstall had burned in London.⁵¹ The church burned the word of God. It shocked Tyndale.

There were surface reasons and deeper reasons why the church opposed an English Bible. The surface reasons were that the English language is rude and unworthy of the exalted language of God's word; and when one translates, errors can creep in, so it is safer not to translate; moreover, if the Bible is in English, then each man will become his own interpreter, and many will go astray into heresy and be condemned; and it was church tradition that only priests are given the divine grace to understand the Scriptures; and what's more, there is a special sacramental value to the Latin service in which people cannot understand, but grace is given. Such were the kinds of things being said on the surface.

But there were deeper reasons why the church opposed the English Bible: one doctrinal and one ecclesiastical. The church realized that they would not be able to sustain certain doctrines biblically because the people would see that they are not in the Bible. And the church realized that their power and control over the people, and even over the state, would be lost if certain doctrines were exposed as unbiblical—especially the priesthood and purgatory and penance.

Thomas More's criticism of Tyndale boils down mainly to the way Tyndale translated five words. He translated *presbuteros* as elder instead of priest. He translated *ekklesia* as congregation instead of church. He translated *metanoeo* as repent instead of do penance. He translated *exomologeo* as acknowledge or admit instead of confess. And he translated *agape* as love rather than charity.

Daniell comments, "He cannot possibly have been unaware that those words in particular undercut the entire sacramental structure of the thousand year church throughout Europe, Asia and North Africa. It was the Greek New Testament that was doing the undercutting."⁵² And with the doctrinal undermining of these ecclesiastical pillars of priesthood and penance and confession, the pervasive power and control of the church collapsed. England would not be a Catholic nation. The reformed faith would flourish there in due time.

What It Cost Tyndale to Translate the Bible

What did it cost William Tyndale under these hostile circumstances to stay faithful to his calling as a translator of the Bible and a writer of the reformed faith?

He fled his homeland in 1524 and was killed in 1536. He gives us some glimpse of those twelve years as a fugitive in Germany and the Netherlands in one of the very few personal descriptions we have from Stephen Vaughan's letter in 1531. He refers to

. . . my pains . . . my poverty . . . my exile out of mine natural country, and bitter absence from my friends . . . my hunger, my thirst, my cold, the great danger wherewith I am everywhere encompassed, and finally . . . innumerable other hard and sharp fightings which I endure.⁵³

All these sufferings came to a climax on May 21, 1535, in the midst of Tyndale's great Old Testament translation labors. We can feel some of the ugliness of what happened in the words of David Daniell: "Malice, self-pity, villainy and deceit were about to destroy everything. These evils came to the English House [in Antwerp], wholly uninvited, in the form of an egregious Englishman, Henry Philips."⁵⁴ Philips had won Tyndale's trust over some months and then betrayed him. John Foxe tells how it happened:

So when it was dinner-time, Master Tyndale went forth with Philips, and at the going forth of Poyntz's house, was a long narrow entry, so that two could not go in a front. Mr. Tyndale would have put Philips before him, but Philips would in no wise, but put Master Tyndale before, for that he pretended to show great humanity. So Master Tyndale, being a man of no great stature, went before, and Philips, a tall comely person, followed behind him: who had set officers on either side of the door upon two seats, who, being there, might see who came in the entry: and coming through the same entry, Philips pointed with his finger over Master Tyndale's head down to him, that the officers who sat at the door might see that it was he whom they should take. . . . Then they took him, and brought him to the emperor's attorney, or procurer-general, where he dined. Then came the procurer General to the house of Poyntz, and sent away all that was there of Master Tyndale's, as well his books as other things: and from thence Tyndale was had to the castle of Filford, eighteen English miles from Antwerp, and there he remained until he was put to death.⁵⁵

Vilvorde Castle is six miles north of Brussels and about the same distance from Louvain. Here Tyndale stayed for 18 months. “The charge was heresy, with not agreeing with the holy Roman Emperor—in a nutshell, being Lutheran.”⁵⁶ A four-man commission from the Catholic center of Louvain was authorized to prove that Tyndale was a heretic. One of them named Latomus filled three books with his interactions with Tyndale and said that Tyndale himself wrote a “book” in prison to defend his chief doctrinal standard: *Sola fides justificat apud Deum—Faith Alone Justifies Before God*. This was the key issue in the end. The evil of translating the Bible came down to this: are we justified by faith alone?

These months in prison were not easy. They were a long dying leading to death. We get one glimpse into the prison to see Tyndale’s condition and his passion. He wrote a letter to in September, 1535, when there seems to have been a lull in the examinations. It was addressed to an unnamed officer of the castle. Here is a condensed version of Mozley’s translation of the Latin:

I beg your lordship, and that of the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me, from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap; for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh, which is much increased in this cell; a warmer coat also, for this which I have is very thin; a piece of cloth too to patch my leggings. My overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woolen shirt, if he will be good enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth to put on above; he has also warmer night-caps. And I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study. In return may you obtain what you most desire, so only that it be for the salvation of your soul. But if any other decision has been taken concerning me, to be carried out before winter, I will be patient, abiding the will of God, to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ: whose spirit (I pray) may ever direct your heart. Amen W. Tindalus⁵⁷

We don’t know if his requests were granted. He did stay in that prison through the winter. His verdict was sealed in August, 1536. He was formally condemned as a heretic and degraded from the priesthood. Then in early October (traditionally October 6), he was tied to the stake and then strangled by the executioner, then afterward consumed in the fire. Foxe reports that his last words were, “Lord! Open the King of England’s eyes!”⁵⁸ He was forty-two years old, never married and never buried.

Tyndale’s Closing Words to Pastors

His closing words to us in this conference on the theme “How Must a Pastor Die” are clear from his life and from his writings. I will let him speak them in his own words from his book *The Obedience of a Christian Man*:

If God promise riches, the way thereto is poverty. Whom he loveth he chasteneth, whom he exalteth, he casteth down, whom he saveth he damneth first, he bringeth no man to heaven except he send him to hell first. If he promise life he slayeth it first, when he buildeth, he casteth all down first. He is no patcher,

he cannot build on another man's foundation. He will not work until all be past remedy and brought unto such a case, that men may see how that his hand, his power, his mercy, his goodness and truth hath wrought all together. He will let no man be partaker with him of his praise and glory.⁵⁹

Let us therefore look diligently whereunto we are called, that we deceive not ourselves. We are called, not to dispute as the pope's disciples do, but to die with Christ that we may live with him, and to suffer with him that we may reign with him.⁶⁰

For if God be on our side: what matter maketh it who be against us, be they bishops, cardinals, popes or whatsoever names they will.⁶¹

So let Tyndale's very last word to us be the last word he sent to his best friend, John Frith, in a letter just before he was burned alive for believing and speaking the truth of Scripture:

Your cause is Christ's gospel, a light that must be fed with the blood of faith. . . . If when we be buffeted for well-doing, we suffer patiently and endure, that is thankful with God; for to that end we are called. For Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow his steps, who did no sin. Hereby have we perceived love that he laid down his life for us: therefore we ought to be able to lay down our lives for the brethren. . . . Let not your body faint. If the pain be above your strength, remember: "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, I will give it you." And pray to our Father in that name, and he will ease your pain, or shorten it. . . . Amen.

¹ David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 217.

² For example, in More's 1529 book, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*.

³ Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 4.

⁴ Thomas More wrote vastly more to condemn Tyndale than Tyndale wrote in his defense. After one book called *An Answer Unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (1531), Tyndale was done. For Thomas More, however, there were "close on three quarters of a million words against Tyndale . . . [compared to] Tyndale's eighty thousand in his *Answer*." *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ William Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, edited with an introduction by David Daniell (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. ix. "Modern champions of the Catholic position like to support a view of the Reformation, that it was entirely a political imposition by a ruthless minority in power against both the traditions and the wishes of the pious people of England. . . . The energy which affected every human life in northern Europe, however, came from a different place. It was not the result of political imposition. It came from the discovery of the Word of God as originally written . . . in the language of the people. Moreover, it could be read and understood, without censorship by the Church or mediation through the Church. . . . Such

reading produced a totally different view of everyday Christianity: the weekly, daily, even hourly ceremonies so lovingly catalogued by some Catholic revisionists are not there; purgatory is not there; there is no aural confession and penance. Two supports of the Church's wealth and power collapsed. Instead there was simply individual faith in Christ the Saviour, found in Scripture. That and only that 'justified' the sinner, whose root failings were now in the face of God, not the bishops or the pope." Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 58.

⁸ Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 79.

⁹ "Not for nothing did William Tyndale, exiled in Cologne, Worms and Antwerp use the international trade routes of the cloth merchants to get his books into England, smuggled in bales of cloth." *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

¹² "In the summer of 1382, Wyclif was attacked in a sermon preached at St. Mary's, Oxford, and his followers were for the first time denounced as 'Lollards'—a loose and suitably meaningless term of abuse ('mutterers') current in the Low Countries for Bible students, and thus heretics." David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 73.

¹³ Gutenberg's printing press came in 1450.

¹⁴ "Tyndale transmitted an English strength which is the opposite of Latin, seen in the difference between 'high' and 'elevated', 'gift' and 'donation', 'many' and 'multitudinous.'" Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Tyndale did not follow Luther in putting Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation in a special section of the New Testament set apart as inferior. "Tyndale, as shown later by his preface to James in his 1534 New Testament, is not only wiser and more generous—he is more true to the New Testament." *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁶ This is available now in print with all its original notes and introductions: *Tyndale's Old Testament*, translated by William Tyndale (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); as is *Tyndale's New Testament*, translated by William Tyndale (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

¹⁷ How could it be that Tyndale was martyred in 1536 for translating the Bible into English, and that his New Testament could be burned in London by Bishop Tunstall, and yet an entire printed Bible, essentially Tyndale's, *The Great Bible*, could be published in England three years later officially endorsed by this Bible-burning bishop? Daniell explains: "Tunstall, whose name would shortly appear on the title pages approving two editions of the Great Bible, was playing politics, being a puppet of the Pope through Wolsey and the king, betraying his Christian humanist learning at the direction of the church, needing to be receiving [Thomas] Wolsey's favor. . . . To burn God's word for politics was to Tyndale barbarous." *Tyndale*, p. 93.

¹⁸ Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. xi.

¹⁹Tyndale, p. 1. Daniell speaks with more precision elsewhere and says that the Authorized Version is 83 percent Tyndale's (Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. vii). Brian Moynahan, in *God's Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible—A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002, p. 1), confirms this with his estimates: Tyndale's words "account for 84 percent of the [King James Version] New Testament and 75.8 percent of the Old Testament books that he translated." Daniell also points out how remarkable the Old Testament translations were: "These opening chapters of Genesis are the first translations—not just the first printed, but the first translations—from Hebrew into English. This needs to be emphasized. Not only was the Hebrew language only known in England in 1529 and 1530 by, at the most, a tiny handful of scholars in Oxford and Cambridge, and quite possibly by none; that there was a language called Hebrew at all, or that it had any connection whatsoever with the Bible, would have been news to most of the ordinary population." *Tyndale*, p. 287.

²⁰ Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. xv.

²¹ *Tyndale*, p. 142.

²²Ibid., p. 2.

²³Ibid., p. 116.

²⁴Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. xv.

²⁵ Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 121. "Tyndale gave the nation a Bible language that was English in words, word-order and lilt. He invented some words (for example, 'scapegoat') and the great Oxford English Dictionary has mis-attributed, and thus also mis-dated a number of his first uses." (Ibid., p. 3)

²⁶ "Tyndale could hardly have missed *De copia*." Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 43. This book went through 150 additions by 1572.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁸ Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 13.

²⁹ "Tyndale as conscious craftsman has been not just neglected, but denied: yet the evidence of the book that follows makes it beyond challenge that he used, as a master, the skill in the selection and arrangement of words which he partly learned at school and university, and partly developed from pioneering work by Erasmus." Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 2.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

³¹ Erasmus' book was titled *On the Freedom of the Will*, and Luther's was *The Bondage of the Will*.

³² Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. 39.

³³ Ibid., p. 37.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

³⁵ Daniell, *Tyndale*, pp. 68-69.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

³⁸ “Central to Tyndale’s insistence on the need for the Scriptures in English was his grasp that Paul had to be understood in relation to each reader’s salvation, and he needed there, above all, to be clear.” *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³⁹ Tyndale, *Selected Writings*, p. 40.

⁴⁰ Here is Tyndale’s definition of the “gospel” that rings with exuberant joy: “*Evangelion* (that we call the gospel) is a Greek word and signifieth good, merry, glad and joyful tidings, that maketh a man’s heart glad and maketh him sing, dance, and leap for joy. . . . [This gospel is] all of Christ the right David, how that he hath fought with sin, with death, and the devil, and overcome them: whereby all men that were in bondage to sin, wounded with death, overcome of the devil are without their own merits or deservings loosed, justified, restored to life and saved, brought to liberty and reconciled unto the favor of God and set at one with him again: which tidings as many as believe laud, praise and thank God, are glad, sing and dance for joy.” *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴² “Tyndale was more than a mildly theological thinker. He is at last being understood as, theologically as well as linguistically, well ahead of his time. For him, as several decades later for Calvin princes and in the 20th century Karl Barth) is the overriding message of the New Testament is the sovereignty of God. Everything is contained in that. It must never, as he wrote, be lost from sight. . . . Tyndale, we are now being shown, was original and new—except that he was also old, demonstrating the understanding of God as revealed in the whole New Testament. For Tyndale, God is, above all, sovereign, active in the individual and in history. He is the one as he put it, in whom alone is found salvation and flourishing.” *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴⁴ Daniell, *Tyndale*, pp. 156-157.

⁴⁵ See note 12.

⁴⁶ Moynahan, *God’s Bestseller*, p. xxii.

⁴⁷ William Tyndale, *The Obedience of A Christian Man*, edited with an introduction by David Daniell (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 202.

⁴⁸ Moynahan, *God’s Bestseller*, p. 260.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁵⁰ The list and details are given in Daniell, *Tyndale*, pp. 183-184.

⁵¹ Daniell, *Tyndale*, pp. 192-193.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 382-383. "Contemporaries noted no such words, however, only that the strangling was bungled and that he suffered terribly." Moynahan, *God's Bestseller*, p. 377.

⁵⁹ Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, p. 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

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